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ABSTRACT

Two factors are important in understanding heckling. First, heckling is a negative comment on the speaker. This negative feedback tends to lower speaker effectiveness. Second, the relationship between the heckler and the audience member is important. If the audience member sees himself as more closely aligned to the speaker, heckling will increase speaker credibility. If he sees himself as more similar to the heckler, heckling will decrease speaker credibility. Two experiments are reported. Ingroup hecklers (students at the same college) lowered credibility and attitude relative to nonheckled and no-speech controls. (Author)

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A Group Identification Analysis of the Heckling of Speakers

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The heckling of speakers has become common in recent years. In some cases it has been raised nearly to the level of folk theater. Senator Strom Thurmond furnishes several examples. At the University of Massachusetts, hecklers shouted obscenities while dressed in Klu Klux Klan garb. In California, carrots were thrown at the podium. Another of his speeches was greeted by a hail of marshmallows. Most heckling, however, involves merely slogan, laughter, expletive, or some other purely vocal interruption. The effects of heckling are not well understood. The situation is so unclear that some speakers believe hecklers can be helpful to them (e.g. George Wallace), while the hecklers themselves obviously heckle to lower the effectiveness of the speaker. The group identification approach outlined here suggests that both of these positions can be correct.

Distraction

Most research on heckling has emphasized the distraction caused by the heckler. Numerous studies, beginning with Festinger and Maccoby (1964), have shown that a distracting stimulus increases the attitude change caused by a persuasive communication. This effect occurs under rather specific conditions, but is reliable (Baron, Baron & Miller, 1973; Zimbardo, Snyder, Thomas, Gold & Gurwitz, 1970). Distraction may increase attitude change either because it interferes with the ability to subvocally counterargue, or because the listener needs to justify the greater expen-

diture of effort required to listen.

The extension of the distraction literature to the heckling situation is questionable. Distractions have usually been number tasks, lights, buzzers, films, etc., so this approach views the heckler as little different from a noisy air conditioner. Nevertheless, one article taking this view was titled "A politician's guide to success on the stump: Hire a heckler" (Keating, 1971).

Research has not supported this derivation. Ware and Tucker (1974) presented a tape recording of a speech opposing annual medical checkups to introductory speech students, varying speaker credibility (Harvard professor versus United Parcel Service employee) and amount of heckling (none, low, medium and high) in a 2 x 4 experimental design. Contrary to the hypotheses, no differences in attitude resulted. Increasing amounts of heckling lowered the credibility of the Harvard professor but had no effect on the already low credibility of the UPS employee.

Silverthorne and Mazmanian (Note 1) also used the distraction derivation to predict that heckling would increase attitude change. Whether presentation of the speech was live, audio, or video, however, heckling substantially decreased the amount of attitude change.

Sloan, Love and Ostrom (1974) review other attitude theories and find a lack of consistency in prediction. For example, assimilation-contrast theory (Sherif & Hovland, 1961) predicts that heckling will polarize an audience. Perspective theory (Ostrom & Upshaw, 1968) predicts exactly the opposite.

Sloan et al. presented a videotaped speech by Nixon or Muskie to groups of students, some of whom were planted hecklers. Heckling generally

lowered attitude, although there were exceptions. Students with initially negative views toward Muskie became less negative. Students with strong opinions about Nixon showed little change, perhaps because of the large amount of information about the president previously possessed by the subjects. While this study provides interesting evidence of the effects of heckling, Sloan et al. do not provide a theoretical framework for interpreting heckling.

Aspects of Heckling

Two aspects of the heckling situation are particularly important in understanding heckling. First, other audience members can provide cues to the credibility of the speaker and the message. A person (P) in the audience can use these cues to help him evaluate the speaker (S) and the message. Hylton (1971) called such cues "listener-listener interaction," and experimentally showed that if a confederate audience gave either positive or negative feedback such as smiles, frowns, body position, etc., the speaker tended to be evaluated by the subject in a similar manner. Heckling always provides negative information about the speaker, so this feedback aspect predicts that heckling would always decrease speaker evaluation.

Secondly, the heckler could belong to either a positive or negative reference group. This complicates the process of evaluating the speech. Not only is the evaluation of the speaker in question, but also the evaluation of the heckler. These evaluations are not independent.

Consider the role of cognitive consistency in these evaluations. The relationship between speaker and heckler (H) is clearly negative. In order to make a balanced cognitive structure (Cartwright & Harary, 1956; Heider,

1946) either the P-S or P-H affective relationship must be negative, but not both. Several considerations influence P's choice.

P will, in general, side with S or H, depending on which of them P perceives himself as closer to. This perceived distance will be a function of the personalities involved, the heckling situation, and P's pre-speech attitude. To the extent that H is seen to reflect P's attitudes, the P-H relation will be more positive than the P-S relation. Heckling will decrease speaker credibility.

This increase or decrease might not be predicted from cognitive consistency per se (although probably by the congruity theory of Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955), but would clearly be a consequence of the accentuation of similarities and differences following this "group" identification process. Accentuation theory (Tajfel, 1959; Eiser & Stroebe, 1972) predicts that once categories (groups) have been identified, intercategory differences are magnified, intracategory differences minimized. In the heckling situation, P must decide to which category, S's or H's, he belongs. Once this is done, characteristics of S, H, and P will be distorted accordingly by P.

In short, the feedback component is always negative, while the group identification component can be either favorable or unfavorable to the speaker.

It is difficult to specify a priori which dimensions are most critical for perceived similarity, since these will vary by situation. A Detroit autoworker will see himself as closer to a St. Louis autoworker than a Detroit auto executive if the topic is assembly line wages; the

reverse is likely if the subject is the 1968 World Series. In most instances of spontaneous heckling H is more likely to be similar to P than S is. Silverthorne and Mazmanian's (Note 1) subjects were introductory psychology students; the hecklers were six members of the same psychology class. Subjects could easily infer that if students similar to themselves thought the speaker was worthy of ridicule, the speaker probably was worthy of ridicule. This loss in credibility easily explains the lower attitude ratings in the heckled groups.

Where heckling is staged by outside groups, the situation is typically much different. If George Wallace is addressing a rally where people have come to hear him, and is heckled by longhaired radicals, the sympathies of the audience are likely to lie with Governor Wallace. Heckling is more likely to help him than hurt him.

If heckling is too impolite, sympathy may be created for S. Democrats accused Nixon of overpublicizing the incident in which his limousine was stoned in San Jose prior to the 1970 congressional elections. In effect, the democrats accused Nixon of trying to use a negative P-H relation (silent majority--rock throwing hippies) to increase the P-S positivity and help his party in the elections.

Since heckling is mainly an attack on the speaker and contains minimal factual information about his topic, the major effects should be on speaker evaluation. Thus, the primary variable of interest in the studies below is speaker credibility. A long line of studies since Hovland and Weiss (1951) show credibility related to attitude change.

The likelihood of forming a positive P-H bond was manipulated by making H a member of an outgroup (another rival college) or the ingroup

(P, H, and S from the same college). In the latter condition, H and P have more in common since both have roles as audience members, so S should be seen as less similar to P. Therefore, the prediction is that intragroup heckling will result in lower speaker credibility than outgroup heckling of an ingroup speaker.

Experiment 1

Procedure

Two introductory speech classes (A, n = 27; B, n = 26) at Central Missouri State University (CMSU) were used. Students are randomly placed in speech courses at CMSU and have nothing to say about what section they are in. As undemocratic as this procedure is, it did assure randomization for this experiment.

An audio tape was prepared of a student government member giving a 3.5 minute speech. The speech advocated an increase in student fees to finance an expansion of the football program at CMSU to major college status. One male and one female mildly heckled the speech, interjecting expressions such as "We don't even have a decent library!" or "We have a good girls' field hockey team! Why not fund them?"

Group A (outgroup hecklers) was told:

> You are going to hear a presentation by a CMSU student representative at the Missouri Student Government Conference last spring. Listen to him carefully. After the presentation you will be asked to respond to a few questions regarding the abilities of the speaker. Please disregard the members of the audience who are attempting to distract the speaker. They are Southwest Missouri State students who opposed many of the resolutions

being presented. This is not a test. Thank you for your cooperation.

These instructions were given by the course instructor, who was unaware of the experimental hypothesis. Group B (ingroup hecklers) was given identical instructions, except that the hecklers were presented as CMSU students. A previous survey had shown Southwest Missouri State (SMSU) to be CMSU's greatest rival.

After hearing the speech, subjects rated the speaker on ten credibility scales. Since these were speech classes, this seemed a natural classroom exercise to the subjects. The scales were taken from Berlo, Lemert and Mertz (1969). Qualification scales were: experienced-inexperienced, trained-untrained, and informed-uninformed. Honesty scales were honest-dishonest, objective-subjective, just-unjust and kind-cruel. Dynamism scales were: friendly-unfriendly, bold-timid and energetic-tired.

Results and Discussion

The top part of table 1 lists the means for each scale category and the *t* test values. Clearly, the ingroup-outgroup nature of the hecklers was an important factor in the credibility of the speaker.

This experiment left several questions unanswered. Did the ingroup heckler lower credibility, the outgroup heckler raise it, or did both processes occur? Second, were there effects on attitude? With such large credibility differences, attitude differences would be expected. Third, some of the heckles used began with "we." This may have been confusing in the outgroup hecklers condition. Fourth, intact classes were used. This made the behavior of rating a speech more natural, and kept the

subjects from wondering what the experiment was all about. Since students are randomly assigned to sections, it is unlikely that the large effects of Experiment 1 were due to class composition factors; however, replication seemed desirable. Experiment 2 was designed to answer these questions.

Insert table 1 about here

Experiment 2

Procedure

Procedure was identical to Experiment 1, except as noted below. Groups C (n = 20) and E (n = 21) were speech classes which received the outgroup and ingroup heckling, respectively. Group D (n = 21) received the same speech, but with the heckling removed from the tape. Group F (n = 20) did not receive any speech. The cover story was the same, but this time the speech urged abolition of dorm hours and dorm food service, and spoke of the CMSU president (Dr. Lovinger) supporting the dorm hours proposal. Since these issues would be less involved with interschool rivalry than football, they provide a stronger test of the hypotheses. The male speaker was interrupted 11 times by a male heckler. The speaker responded by asking the heckler to wait until a question and answer period, or ignored the heckle. Heckles included "What do you want Lovinger, that bum, to do," "Expressed his support, my ass," "It's funny how you can't answer anything right now," and similar obnoxious comments.

Coincidentally, women's dorm hours were dropped the day before Experiment 2, but since all groups were run at the same time, this should

have no differential effect. Twelve days after the recorded speech was presented and the credibility measures were taken, all groups were given an attitude questionnaire of nine items, four relating to topics covered in the speech, one relating to the general conduct of the university president, and four control items unrelated to the speech.

Results

Table 1 lists the scale means and significance test results. Overall F was significant for each of the credibility dimensions. Group C's ratings are significantly different from Group E's, with the nonheckled control group D in between. However, the differences between Group C and Group D are not significant.

The results of the attitudinal posttest are summarized in Table 2. Items were 1-5 scales; the scores are reported here so that high numbers indicate agreement with the attitude statement. S indicates the speaker supported the statement; O indicates he opposed it. Omitted are questions on Lovinger's overall job as university president, women's rights, Nixon, Watergate, and tuition increases. None of these control items on the questionnaire differed by groups (all $F < 1.0$) which shows that the attitude differences in Table 2 are due to the manipulation rather than pre-existing group differences.

Items dealt with in the speech did show differences. Overall F tests showed significant overall differences for the two dorm food items. Subsequent Neuman-Keuls tests (Winer, 1971) showed this was mostly due to the unfavorable reaction caused by the ingroup hecklers, which led to a boomerang effect on the dorm food questions. The speech itself apparently caused little attitude change on the issue.

The speech was successful in persuading students that Dr. Lovinger had been more instrumental in removing women's dorm hours than they had thought (Groups C, D, and E versus F) but no differences due to the heckling were found.

Insert table 2 about here

Attitude item 4, which asked about the change in women's dorm hours, showed no differences among groups. The attitude on this item was so extremely positive that a ceiling effect occurred.

Discussion

These two experiments show strong differences between hecklers seen as ingroup members and hecklers seen as outgroup members in their effect on speaker credibility and subsequent attitude. The ingroup heckling lowered speaker credibility and led to boomerang attitude effects on some items. The outgroup heckling group was nonsignificantly higher on these variables than a nonheckled control group.

The failure of the outgroup heckled speaker to have significantly higher credibility and attitude effects than a nonheckled control has several plausible explanations. In our view, it is more likely due to the inherent difficulty of creating a positive effect from negative heckler feedback. In the ingroup heckler group the feedback component and the group identification component both work against the speaker. In the outgroup heckler group the group identification component favors the speaker, but the feedback is still negative, providing counterarguments to the audience. Another alternative is that the outgroup was not far enough out.

SMSU is, after all, only another campus in the same state college system. A third alternative is that outgroup hecklers are merely ignored and have no effect on the speech, while attention is paid to ingroup hecklers.

Although the data support a group identification analysis of heckling, there is one plausible distraction interpretation. Zimbardo et al. (1970) found that distraction increased attitude change if subjects were to attend to the message, but decreased both attitude change and message recall if subjects were to attend to the distraction. If ingroup subjects paid attention to the hecklers and outgroup subjects paid attention to the speaker, this would explain our attitude results. This explanation involves group mechanisms as mediators determining attention. However, in the Silverthorne and Mazmanian (Note 1) study, message recall was equal in their (ingroup) heckled groups, despite lower attitude effects. In addition, this alternative seems unlikely because it is unclear why credibility would be so strongly affected.

The results here would predict polarization of an audience in which the heckler would be ingroup for some, outgroup for others. Although Sloan et al. conclude that heckling does not lead to polarization, their data are concerned with polarization on the basis of initial opinion. While initial opinion is part of the ingroup-outgroup choice process, there are other important components, especially the social roles of speaker, heckler, and audience member.

Heckling is a complex activity that can take a variety of forms, which makes generalization dangerous. On the basis of the research so far, interpersonal dynamics provides a far better framework than distraction for understanding the effects of heckling. On this basis, Keating's (1971)

dictum for politicians can be better stated: Be sure and hire a disliked heckler or you will be better off dealing with the issues.

Reference Notes

1. Silverthorne, C. B. & Mazmanian, L. The effects of heckling and media of presentation on the impact of a persuasive communication. Paper presented at the Western Psychological Association convention, Anaheim, California, 1973.

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Table 1

Scale Means and Significance Tests for

Credibility Dimensions in

Experiments 1 and 2

	Qualification	Honesty	Dynamism	n
Experiment 1: Expand football				
A (outgroup heckling)	6.00	5.42	5.49	27
B (ingroup heckling)	4.33	3.98	4.12	26
t_{AB} (51)	7.28***	6.20***	7.11***	
ω^2_{AB} [a]	.50	.41	.48	
Experiment 2: Dorm food, hours				
C (outgroup heckling)	6.08	5.42	5.63	20
D (no heckling)	5.63	5.08	5.54	21
E (ingroup heckling)	5.12	4.74	4.90	21
F_{CDE} (2, 59)	7.04**	3.25*	4.03*	
ω^2_{CDE}	.16	.07	.09	
t_{CD} (39)	1.75	1.27	.33	
t_{CE} (39)	3.73***	2.55*	2.59*	
ω^2_{CE}	.24	.12	.12	
t_{DE} (40)	2.02*	1.29	2.28*	

Note. Items were scored on a 1 to 7 basis, with 7 indicating high credibility. Scale means are item averages. Wherever a significant t is reported, the corresponding Neuman-Keuls test (Winer, 1971) is also significant.

[a]Proportion of variance accounted for by experimental manipulation. See Hays (1963).

*$p < .05$.

**$p < .01$.

***$p < .001$.

Table 2

Means and Significance Tests for Experiment 2 Attitudinal Posttest

Attitude Item	C Outgroup Heckling	D No Heckling	E Ingroup Heckling	F No Speaker	ANOVA F (3, 71)	ANOVA ω^2
1. "I would rather buy meals out than eat in the dorm." (S)	3.59	3.10	2.12	3.10	2.89*[a]	.07
2. "I believe that the meals in the dorm are worth the money." (O)	1.94	1.70	3.06	2.06	3.63*[b]	.10
Pooled dorm food questions (1 minus 2) (S)	1.65	1.40	-.94	1.04	4.47**[c]	.12
3. "Dr. Lovinger was instrumental in the removal of women's dorm hours." (S)	2.53	2.43	2.07	1.32	3.93*[d]	.11
4. "Removing women's hours is a step in the right direction." (S)	4.59	4.43	4.71	5.00	1.95	.04

[a] Neuman-Keuls results: C > E*.

[b] Neuman-Keuls results: C < E*, D < E*, E > F*.

[c] Neuman-Keuls results: C > E*, D > E**, E < F*.

[d] Neuman-Keuls results: C > F*, D > F*.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.